

French Parliamentarians Head to Crimea for Controversial Visit

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July 22, 2015



Thierry Mariani

French members of parliament have inspired delight in Russia and provoked ire abroad with a planned visit to Crimea, where they are set to arrive Thursday.

In an interview with Russian daily newspaper Kommersant on Wednesday, Thierry Mariani — the delegation's leader and member of the center-right The Republicans party — said that the trip had been planned by the lawmakers themselves, not by the French government.

He noted that this was a non-issue, as “French parliamentarians are free to make their own decisions,” and stressed that the delegation was not acting on Paris' behalf.

“We want to understand how the people [in Crimea] live,” said Mariani.

In his personal view, Russia's annexation of Crimea is “an accomplished and definitive fact, supported by the referendum.”

But Mariani told Kommersant that while some members of his delegation agree, others are less sure, and want to visit the peninsula in order to better gauge the situation there.

Western countries have imposed sanctions against Russia over its move to annex Crimea from Ukraine in 2014. Mariani does not support sanctions, according to his Twitter posts.

Meanwhile, as Mariani trumpets the freedom of French parliamentarians, officials in Paris are less enthusiastic.

Romen Nadal, a spokesman for the French Foreign Ministry, said in comments to news agency Interfax that the Crimea trip would be in violation of international law, adding: "We regret it very much."

Mariani added in comments to Kommersant that the delegation had not consulted the Ukrainian authorities about the trip.

The Ukrainian Foreign Ministry said in a statement published on its website Wednesday that if French lawmakers visit Crimea without Ukrainian permission, they face bans on entering Ukraine in the future.

But not everyone lamented the parliamentarians' journey: Russian politicians rejoiced.

Konstantin Kosachev, head of the Federation Council's Foreign Affairs committee, said in a Facebook post Wednesday that the visit is "very important."

"This is, undoubtedly, the first step toward a breakthrough, because the French National Assembly, European Parliament, PACE and the OSCE's Parliamentary Assembly, cannot ignore this delegation's position," he wrote.

The head of the State Duma's Foreign Affairs committee, Alexei Pushkov, tweeted in French that "liberty lives on in France."

According to Mariani, the delegation was invited by the Russian Peace Foundation, which is led by State Duma lawmaker Leonid Slutsky.

The French lawmakers were set to visit Moscow on Wednesday, where they would meet with the head of State Duma Sergei Naryshkin, before visiting Yalta, Simferopol and Sevastopol on Thursday.

Correction: This article previously incorrectly stated that former French president Nicolas Sarkozy would be among the delegates scheduled to visit Crimea. In fact, while several members of Sarkozy's party are slated to attend, the former president himself is not expected.

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Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/07/22/french-parliamentarians-head-to-crimea-for-controversial-visit-a48452>